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AUTHOR Lieberman, Nancy S.; Vaughn, Suzanne A.
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ABSTRACT

The Public Assistance Comprehensive Education (PACE) program was established by Tompkins Cortland Community College at the request of the New York State Department of Social Services (DSS) and in cooperation with local DSS offices. PACE offers up to five semesters of vocational training to individuals receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Other PACE services include pre-enrollment assessment, program selection assistance, basic skills development, financial aid, coordination with DSS, and academic support, such as assigned academic advisors and weekly appointments with counselors. Job development and placement activities were introduced during fall 1987 for students planning to graduate within two semesters. In August 1987, 128 students with a total of 215 children were enrolled in PACE. Of them, 60% were single parents, 23% depended on public transportation, 43% lived more than 15 miles from campus, 66% needed at least one remedial course, and 20% reported substance abuse or battering. A program evaluation showed that: (1) the retention rate for the 50 students who started PACE in fall 1986 was 88% through the end of the spring semester (compared to a college-wide rate of 81%); (2) retention rates were 50% for the same group through fall 1987; and (3) the mean grade point average (GPA) of PACE students for fall 1986 was 2.65, with 46% of the students earning GPA's of 3.0 and above. The two-year degree PACE program has been completed by nine participants, who are all now gainfully employed. (GFW)

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STUDENT SERVICES AND RETENTION FOR WELFARE STUDENTS

Nancy S. Lieberman and Suzanne A. Vaughn

Tompkins Cortland Community College

JC 900578

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Tompkins Cortland Community College, at the request of the NYS Department of Social Services and in cooperation with local DSS offices, established a vocational training program for individuals receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Students are enrolled in vocational or technical programs for up to five semesters, until a degree or certificate is attained. Components of the program are: recruitment, pre-enrollment assessment and program selection, basic skill development, financial aid, coordination with DSS, academic support, and job placement services.

The program has been an outstanding success, with high retention and graduation rates as well as academic accomplishment.

THE COLLEGE SETTING

Tompkins Cortland Community College is located in a rural area in upstate New York and serves its two sponsoring counties, Tompkins and Cortland, and a third county, Tioga, which has no sponsored community college. The average number of students served annually has grown to almost 3,500, including both full- and part-time enrollees. Programs are a mix of technical, vocational and transfer and include a wide variety of community service activities.

The College has attempted, over the years, to serve the educational and training needs of the nontraditional group of adults who are more highly "at risk." These nontraditional students have been recruited sporadically for special training programs. Such programs have not had good results because short-term training has not proven to be adequate to prepare an individual for work place demands. Before attempting to establish a program for nontraditionnal welfare students which would prepare them to be permanently employed (by enrolling them in regular two-year programs), criteria for such a program were researched.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH FOR DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROGRAM

Research on adult, nontraditional student programs was reviewed and articles were collected and studied.

Two studies found that personal life circumstances such as conflict with job, home, family or child care responsibilities, and problems with finances are most commonly cited as contributing to adult attrition (Beal and Noel, 1980) (Mishler, 1983).

The Tinto Model (1975) suggests that students' decisions about whether or not to drop out from a post-secondary educational institution reflect the extent of their academic and social integration within it. A subsequent study of retention of nontraditional students (Weidman, 1985) selected indicators of "social integration" and "academic integration." Their work suggests that the following support mechanisms can have a significant effect on retention: provision of special counselors who are available at times and places that are easily accessible to nontraditional students and faculty that are oriented more fully to the particular problems of these students; provision of financial aid; provision of day care facilities on campus; provision of resources for personal and career counseling and flexibility with respect to institutional demands.

A study (Lukenbill and McCabe, 1978) identified the major impediments to and facilitators of adult students' success during the first three months of school and recommends interventions which would minimize the difficulties of returning adults as they attempt to manage the learning process. The eight categories of factors which were found to influence adult students' attempts to manage the learning process are closely interrelated in the lives of the students; the issues are: economic, home and family, transportation, personal, goal and commitment, academic adjustment, classroom and institutional. The authors discussed each issue in depth and then suggested three categories of interventions: helping adult students

with their problems outside of school, improving the classroom experience, and improving academic services.

CREATION OF THE PACE PROGRAM

This literature and additional information on teaching adults indicated that a program which provides specific and special support services could be effective in bringing nontraditional students to college and retaining those students. Conversations with county social service commissioners in our area assured us that there was a pool, primarily women with small children, who would be interested in educating themselves to improve their employability. Simultaneously, we discovered that the New York State Department of Social Services would be interested in supporting model programs to develop the employability of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) recipients.

With the enthusiastic support of the State Department of Social Services, funding was provided for the start-up and first year of a program to provide exactly the kinds of support the research showed is needed and to recruit students into the programs of the College. Each of the three counties served by the College agreed to participate. The majority of the funding came directly from the state, although a portion was to be paid by each county on a per-student basis. The program designed was designated as the Public Assistance Comprehensive Education Program, or PACE.

The added services for PACE students are provided by a full-time

staff that has grown from two to five professionals. The ratio of professional staff to students has remained at about 1 to 30. One-half of the Director's time is devoted to administration and there is a full-time Administrative Assistant for support services.

It is the premise of the PACE program that when students finish their two-year degree in a vocationally oriented field, they will be able to earn enough money to support their family and, in addition, have more disposable income than they would have if they remained on public assistance. Students receive sufficient financial aid, largely through state and federal grants, to pay their tuition, fees, books and some of their child care and transportation costs. The county pays the additional child care and transportation costs, so the students' basic AFDC grants are not affected while they attend college.

PROBLEMS FACED BY PACE STUDENTS

Since most of the participants have extremely stressful living conditions, a significant portion of PACE staff time is spent addressing personal difficulties. Whenever appropriate and possible, students are linked with community-based services or the College counseling office for more in-depth assistance with these problems.

The problems faced by these students greatly exceed those faced by other groups of students on the community college campus. The following statistics, based on 128 students who had enrolled in PACE by August 1987, illustrate the magnitude and diversity of these problems.

- Sixty percent are single parents.
- The 128 students have 215 children; 74 of these are under 5.
- Twenty-three percent rely on public transportation.
- Forty-three percent live more than 15 miles from the campus.
- Fifty-three percent own cars, but ADC regulations limit the value of recipients' cars to $1,500 so the condition of these vehicles is often poor, and there are many breakdowns and repair expenses associated with driving to school.
- Twenty-four percent are dependent on other students for rides.
- Sixty-six percent needed at least one remedial course.
- Approximately 20 percent reported substance abuse or battering.

STUDENT INTAKE

Potential students are referred to the PACE program by case-workers in the appropriate county Department of Social Services. They are scheduled for intake interviews and placement testing on their first visit to the campus. During their second visit, students meet individually with a staff member from the financial aid office to review their financial aid applications and with a PACE staff member to review placement testing results. PACE students are required to take any remedial courses recommended by the test results and they are limited to a maximum of 14 credits per semester, with 65 credits required for most degrees. Therefore, each county has agreed to automatically approve five semesters, plus summers when necessary, rather than the usual four. The third visit to the campus is for the purpose of registering for classes. Planning for study time, child

care and transportation arrangements, and specific family needs takes place during each of these visits.

ONGOING SUPPORT SERVICES

Once PACE students are enrolled and attending classes, an extensive range of supportive services are provided by the PACE professional staff. These services include academic advisement and tutoring; consultive assistance and/or advocacy with respect to child care, transportation and food stamps and personal counseling. PACE staff are actively involved in job development, and, in conjunction with the Placement/Transfer Office, provide assistance with job placement to graduating PACE students. Contact with employed graduates continues for six months.

Because PACE participants have varied class schedules, pressures to be home relatively early for their children, and differing personal styles and needs, we have found it most effective to utilize a variety of delivery methods for these supportive services. PACE students are required to stop by the conveniently located office at least once per week. Staff use these contacts to answer questions, provide information and to probe for problems. During the first five weeks of their enrollment, participants are required to take a one-credit course, Introduction to the College Experience for PACE Students, which is taught by a PACE staff member. The class sessions provide a forum for discussions of problems or stresses, builds a support group, and allow for sharing of information. Once the PACE staff have established a positive, helpful relationship with the PACE

students, students tend to come readily to the staff with concerns, problems, and frustrations.

Students in the PACE program are assigned academic advisors from the faculty and participate in the same courses and registration procedures as all other full-time students. The role of the PACE staff is to provide more in-depth advisement, support and clarification of information. In addition, staff arrange for group or individual tutoring services for students who need such assistance. During the first five weeks of each semester, PACE staff members contact each faculty member who has PACE students in class. We identify the PACE students, indicate our willingness to provide support services and ask faculty members to keep us informed of student problems. Usually, they volunteer information on how each student is doing. All of this information is recorded in student files and related to students during check-in visits. If a student is identified as needing assistance, PACE staff take a more active role in seeking the student out, explaining the situation, and arranging for appropriate services.

Example: Linda is a 28-year-old mother of a three-year-old girl. When she enrolled in PACE, she was interested in the art or advertising field. She learned that a degree in commercial art would qualify her for the type of position she desired, and we were able to convince the county to allow her to enroll in the commercial art program even though it is a liberal arts program. She achieved the highest grade average of any PACE student for her first semester, a

3.94. She has maintained that high level of achievement and has been initiated into Phi Theta Kappa, the Honor Society. She has utilized PACE emergency loans as an interim solution for problems created by slow transportation reimbursements and she has turned to PACE staff for supportive counseling concerning her former husband's treatment of her daughter.

Job development and placement activities were initiated during the fall 1987 semester, the third semester of the PACE project. These activities consist of workshops and individual conferences with PACE students who are within two semesters of graduation. Workshops focus on resume preparation, practice interviews and job search plans. The individual conferences supplement the workshop activities in a more personalized manner. The job development activities consist of staff contact and meetings with community employers to stimulate interest in PACE applicants as well as in-depth interaction with the College placement counselor to secure openings for PACE students.

RESULTS

The PACE program was designed to assist multi-problem, public assistance recipients in obtaining education and jobs. The problems faced by these students greatly exceed those faced by other groups of students on the community college campus.

In spite of the academic, personal and financial difficulties faced by PACE students, their achievements have been remarkable in terms of retention rates as well as grade point averages.

The retention rate for the fifty students who started in the fall of 1986 was 88 percent through the end of the spring semester as compared to a college-wide rate of 81 percent. Their retention rate through the fall 1987 semester was 50 percent, as compared to the college rate of 53 percent. We expect at least 38 percent of those students who began in the fall of 1986 to obtain degrees or certificates by December of 1988 (within five semesters). This compares very favorably to the overall college rate of 20 percent of degree-seeking students obtaining their degrees within six semesters. Of those who stopped attending during the summer of 1987, 14 percent are employed and 19 percent went off AFDC because of a spouse's income.

In addition to these respectable retention rates, PACE students have had remarkable academic success. For the fall of 1986 the mean grade average was 2.65 on a 4.0 scale, and 46 percent of the students had averages of 3.0 or better. For the spring 1987 semester the mean was 2.41, and 29 percent of the students had averages of 3.0 or better. Thirty-three students attended the summer 1987 session: their mean average was 2.64, with 58 percent achieving at least a 3.0 average. For the fall of 1987 the mean grade average was 2.48, and 34 percent of the students had averages of 3.0 or better. Eight PACE participants have joined Phi Theta Kappa, the national honor society for community colleges.

Nine participants have graduated from the program: seven in May 1988 and two in August. Two graduates are employed as nurses, earning more than $8.00 per hour, three are working as special

education trainers at an average of $5.25 per hour, one is a secretary at $4.55 per hour, one is establishing a telemarketing program for a large employer at $6.50 per hour, one is a customer service agent for an airline at $5.00 per hour, one is pursuing a four-year degree and one August graduate is working as an administrative assistant in a local hospital at $5.95 per hour. One of the May graduates was selected as the New York State Continuing Education Adult Student of the Year. All of these students have significantly more income than they did on public assistance and would have been qualified only for minimum wage jobs without this program.

EXAMPLES:

Cindy is the single mother of two daughters, one school-aged and one born in 1986. Her work history consisted of restaurant hostessing. She entered the Nursing Program in fall 1986. After graduation in May 1988, she accepted employment with an area hospital at $8.00 per hour.

During the two years that she was enrolled in the PACE program, she received $16,914 in AFDC, HEAP and food stamps, and $2,820 in incentives, transportation and child care reimbursements. Since her younger daughter will not reach the age of 6 until February 1992, she could have received benefits, without participating in training or employment, until that time, an additional 43 months @ $650. The total cost of her participation in PACE was $2,820 plus $650 for the local share of PACE, $3,470. The county has saved at least 43 months of benefits, $27,950, for a net savings of $24,480. In addition,

Cindy's monthly income increased from $700 to $1,408 per month as a result of her employment.

Kay is the single mother of four school-aged children who first enrolled in Tompkins Cortland for the spring 1987 semester. Her goal was to obtain a Certificate in Human Services. She received her certificate in May 1988. During the spring 1988 semester, she participated in the PACE job readiness activities and began her job search. She accepted a position as an assistant coordinator of independent living for a local human service agency. She started on a part-time basis and moved into full-time work upon graduation at the rate of $5.35 per hour.

During the time that she was enrolled in PACE, she received $8,966 in AFDC, HEAP and food stamps, as well as $399 in training incentives and transportation reimbursements. Her PA case was closed on June 30, with an average monthly savings to the county of $560.

Kay's family income is now $11,128 per year plus child support, an increase of $6,645 in the first year.

CONCLUSION

The preliminary success of the PACE program at Tompkins Cortland Community College is illustrated by the higher-than-average grade achievement of the students, the very respectable retention rates and the successful employment of graduates. These retention rates are particularly impressive because of the family stresses, transportation problems, child care difficulties and other complications that face this particular group of nontraditional

students. We believe that the program has been successful for four reasons: (a) because of the nature of the relationship that the staff establishes with PACE students, communicating the message that they are there to be helpful and supportive in addressing the students' needs; (b) because of the frequent communication between PACE staff and students, due to the requirement that participants stop in the office on a regular basis; (c) because of the active role PACE staff adopt in addressing students' problems, particularly in contacting faculty and facing up to academic difficulties with the students early in the semester, and (d) because of the comprehensive job preparation and placement activities.

PACE expects to continue gathering data on grades and retention rates as well as on placement rates. All students who are placed in jobs will be tracked for at least six months after their placement. We anticipate continuation of the program's very successful results.

PACE staff believe that the objectives that are usually associated with welfare reform, which include enhanced self-sufficiency and the movement of AFDC recipients off welfare and into well-paying, permanent jobs, are being achieved through the PACE program and could be successfully replicated by other colleges. We urge other institutions to consider establishing such a program to address this growing community need and to increase their enrollment through serving this receptive group of nontraditional students. The need for such programs is likely to increase with the passage of the Federal Welfare Reform Act in December in October 1988.

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